DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 188 201 CS 205 627

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TITLE The Value of Literature Study to the Composition Teacher.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 9p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (31st, Washington, DC, March 13-15, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Course Content: *English Teacher Education; Literary Devices; *Literature Appreciation; Preservice Teacher Education; *Teacher Education Curriculum; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

A review of the arguments for and against requiring literature courses in the preparation of teachers of English reveals that a thorough knowledge of literature is essential to teach English, and especially composition courses, successfully. Courses in rhetoric, linguistics, and advanced writing are also necessary, but the major emphasis should be on literature study for these reasons: (1) good reading experience is the best preparation for being a good writer, (2) literature study provides a background for giving constructive editorial help to student writers, (3) it provides experience in the close reading of texts, (4) it provides literary knowledge of writers' techniques, and (5) it provides teachers with the understanding to give student writers the fullest possible information about what they are doing and how their writing affects readers. (AEA)

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THE VALUE OF LITERATURE STUDY TO THE COMPOSITION TEACHER

By Gary L. Harmon, University of North Florida (Jacksonville)

Perhaps the study of literature as a basic for the composition teacher is not so obvious any more, I take it, for I have been called upon to defend a tradition--one which I will, before I finish, also attack. I must admit that, once I accepted the invitation to share my thoughts about the value of literature studies to the composition teacher, I had some misgivings. For one thing, the precious field of literature has been experiencing some blights, crop failures, and droughts. As I thought about the composition teacher helping all those inexperienced writers in all the English classrooms, particularly with some of the newer problems thrust upon them by the cultural changes we've undergone, I had to have some doubt that literature is as useful as I thought it must be to the composition teacher. I made a list of items to consider:

Item: Only recently, yet another essayist for The Chronicle of Higher Education alluded to the potential hazard that the study of literature might be a dying discipline.

Item: In a move that I suspect has been repeated in many parts of the country, the Florida Junior College English faculty recently eliminated the reading of fiction from the course objectives of all the required language arts courses. The replacement is The Random House Handbook as the only book for the course.

Item: Students have been changing. Many are reared as much by media as by the parents and the schools. Language skills have been declining to the lament of almost everyone. There is a turnover in the population of our schools and colleges; students move around more than they used to. Many have lost their respect for authority--and with it the discipline that goes with reading and writing. And the student group is more complex than it was a few years ago, with many returning older students mixed with the younger.

Item: The number of English majors in this country has declined from nearly 190,000 in 1971 to about 88,000 in 1978, according to Jasper Neel in the ADE Bulletin. English as the number one major a few years ago is no longer perceived as so valuable for careers as other majors.

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Item: Women who are bent on pursuing careers tend not to major in English so frequently as they once did. Instead, they have moved to more applied, money-making fields, such as business, accounting, communications, or even social work.

Item: We are more aware of the pollution of language, and we are more sensitive to minority cultures and their claims to recognition. These and other practical, earth-shaking problems--attitudes towards sex, energy needs and resources, awareness of poverty and starvation, for example--are stronger in the consciousness of students than they have been before. Can the study of literature remain as it has been while students are looking for explanations and answers to such enormous problems?

Item: Accountability has perhaps, with its step-child the performance-based or competency-based standards, tended to turn English teachers into "composition teachers."--that is, teachers of a craft for which it is possible to write clear, attainable, and accountable behavior objectives.

You can supply your own clutch of "items" to support the contention that the state of English study has changed drastically over the last ten or twenty years.

Having realized a number of these changes, I thought further to see whether there is some counterbalancing force <u>for</u> literature in our profession. For that purpose, I consulted the NCTE "Statement on the Preparation of Teachers of English and Language Arts" published in the September, 1978 <u>College English</u> journal. The NCTE does indeed recognize that literature is important to the teacher of English. Here, for review is what our own professional association has to say about the <u>knowledge and abilities</u> that English teachers should have. I have confined the list to the many references to literature: "Teachers of English need to know how to draw on for their teaching

--processes by which one learns to read, from initial exposure to language in early childhood . . . through more advanced stages by which the reader comes increasingly to understand and respond to details of meaning and nuances of expression;

--an extensive body of literature in English (including literature for children and adolescents, popular literature, oral literature, nonwestern literature, and the literature by women and minority groups.

--varied ways of responding to, discussing, and understanding works of literature in all forms;

--major research studies on acquisition and growth of language in children and adults, or reading, on response to literature, on the processes of composing . . . ."

Then the NCTE has this to say about abilities English teachers should have. "They should be able

--to help students experience the connections between the experience of reading and the experience of writing;

--to help students learn to observe and report accurately;

--to help students develop satisfying ways of responding to, and productive ways of talking about, works of literature.

And about attitudes: Teachers of English at all levels need to reveal in their classes and in their work with individual students:

--a conviction that by helping students increase their power to use and respond to language both creatively and responsibly they are helping these students to grow as human beings;

--a desire to help students become more familiar with the diverse cultures and their art.

This is a good, healthy list of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that the NCTE believes the English teacher should have, even, presumably, when teaching composition. I was heartened. My search for the Holy Grail of literary study had found a bright spot on the journey. I noticed, too, that the NCTE Statement nowhere talked of a "composition teacher." I take it that a composition teacher is an incomplete English teacher; a person who is a composition teacher only is a stunted expression of "the Teacher of English and Language Arts" the NCTE speaks of. Chances are still, I believe, that in the high schools, it is impossible to get a job teaching composition only, and even the teaching of reading requires a knowledge of literature. In the community colleges and even

some four-year colleges, it is possible, I suppose, to be teaching nothing but composition. That's the possible situation, and that's probably why I got asked to speak to this subject. If a community college teacher doesn't have to teach any literature, why know any?

My inclination is to assert that it is not the teacher's fault or the fault of teacher preparation that has brought this situation about, for the fault is with our society's not understanding yet that literature is a basic, just as composition is--for reasons we are surely familiar with. Thus, I would say that we need to reform the thinking of those who conceive the curriculums where composition is a requirement for all students but the study of literature is not. If both subjects were required, then community college English teachers would teach both subjects, and I would not have to defend the value of literature for composition teachers.

Still, as I thought further about the subject, I began to turn pessimistic again. I thought of all the things wrong with literary study today and why the study of literature might not be considered as valuable as it should to the composition teacher--or lots of other people. Here are a few, some borrowed from W. Ross Winterowd:

--Our literary study still focusses too often on the "high" and the sophisticated literature to the exclusion of the literature that students and people of taste actually read.

--Literature is still too much treated as a consumer product, the raw material for critical essays.

--For some, it is a way of lamenting the awful ignorance of the inexperienced writers, by lambasting the gaucheries of their writing.

--We don't seem interested in the process of reading or even the effects of reading literature on the readers in any meaningful way.

--Too often, the literary criticism we use obfuscates a literary text rather than illuminates it, probably because it was written for a few other English teachers, not people in general.

--By and large, the study of literature is still confined to the study of books, while television and radio still lack informed teachers for learning to read them and their structures and images well.

--We also isolate literature too often from other disciplines and subjects--ethics, death and dying, social problems, for instance.

--We teachers too often emphasize a "proper" response to literature, though people of taste are not interested in such responses.

--Our study of literature does not universally, yet, reflect the experience of minorities and women in as great a proportion as is appropriate.

Add to this list of ills the fact that teachers of composition more often than not know more about literature than about rhetoric and writing. Surely this is a situation in need of repair. All the English teachers who know a reasonable amount about rhetoric, whether it be from Gordon Rohman and Albert Wlecke's 1964 study, Edward Corbett's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, or Young, Becker, and Pike's Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, surely regret that, as composition teachers, they didn't learn these books at any time during the English major. Instead, they read histories of literature and enough theory perhaps to understand better the nature of literature they were studying. There needs to be a correction in our preparation of English teachers in this respect. A course in rhetoric could replace one in literature. Then there's the ubiquitous course in linguistics and the course in advanced writing (which should help students learn to help others to write well) in the English major.

But I would retain the rest of the major for literature. Why? For one thing, good writers are good readers of good writing. I say this in spite of all the problems in which literary study is wallowing, for I know that virtually every discipline has its absurdities and follies. These problems will have to be repaired, but in the meantime, the would-be

writer and the future teacher of writers are best served by lots of good reading experience, for this is the best preparation for being a good writer. And of course, writing papers about the problems literature poses--and having them marked by English professors who mark for correct and effective English--is an effective way to learn to write well.

By teaching English--and not composition only--surely, this involves the teacher and student in reading imaginative literature. But even if we were to limit the future teacher to composition only, what would literature study contribute to the teaching of writing? For one thing, literature study, no matter how flawed--as I have suggested above--provides substantive experience for the student about the world. That is, it provides a background, a wealth of experience that must be called into play when reading and interpreting other literature or when reading and making suggestions on student writing. Those extrapolations, those leaps of imagination we undertake when we read literature are also helpful to the teacher to give constructive editorial help to the writer.

The literary reader treats the text--whether it is a short story or a freshman English paper--with a number of complex cognitive actions. According to Louise W. Phelps at Case Western Reserve University, "the process [of interpretation] draws on the reader's memory, his knowledge of language, his knowledge of the world, his capacity to predict and anticipate, his abilities to recognize assumptions, to see implications, to correlate and reconcile meanings, and finally to integrate into a whole." The act of reading a literary text, in other words, is very like the act of reading closely the text of a student paper. One must construe a structure of meanings intended by the writer--committing intentionally the intentional fallacy--in order to be a good reader of the possible meanings any given piece of student writing can communicate. In this way,

the literary background of the teacher of composition helps the student in drawing correct inferences and seeing imaginative ways in which the paper can be edited for improvement.

Our sensitivity to language itself--our inclination to search for the right word; the phrasing that a well-crafted sentence contains; the best dramatic structure for a series of ideas; our inclination to diagnose a piece of literature to see what meanings it will render; our pattern of collecting data, making inferences, hypothesizing, evaluating, and judging when reading literature--is a most appropriate preparation for the intelligent reading of student writing. All I have named here comes under the heading of the close reading of texts. Our accumulated sense of appropriate language (from the study of literature) helps us when we read student papers to see that the student could adopt other patterns of language that would be more apt or even more consistent for the subject under discussion. Then, too, our literary knowledge of patterns of the reading act and responses--expectations, reversal, surprise, emphasis and anticipation--help us show the inexperienced writer those possibilities for using such techniques in his or her own writing. But we have to learn these things someplace--and we do it as a matter of course as we develop our own educated imagination through the study of literature. The teacher of writing who is well-versed in the interpretation of literature can describe to the student cognitive and emotional problems that affect our reading, for instance, in remembering or predicting meaning as we read, resolving logical or emotional inconsistencies which puzzle us, or rejecting statements which conflict with our knowledge of the world. All of those inferences are patterned responses we have learned in the study of literature.

Literature study makes us skilled readers. And when we understand how to read well, we can give the student the fullest possible information about what he is doing and how his writing affects us as readers. And of course, we can--because we know of so many possibilities of language and structured argument through the study of literature--extend a student writer's options by supplying or directing him to knowledge he or she lacks. And what could the writer lack that we would have learned in the study of literature? Professor Phelps puts it well: "facts, knowledge of genre and language conventions, knowledge of language structure, or concepts and labels that will help the student writer organize what he knows."

Finally, I must remind us that, as I have described it, regardless of all that is happening with literary study and in our culture these days, we still have not lost sight of the person in the process--the student learning to write, the student learning to teach composition, or the teacher continuing to learn. That will go on, whether we want it or not--as long as we are continuing to study literature by close readings of <u>what</u> is communicated and <u>how</u> it communicates.